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ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension means extracting the required information from a written text as efficiently as possible. This paper describes how English as a Second Language (ESL) students can become efficient readers of English, focusing on language proficiency, ESL instructions in a foreign language, and the cognitive academic language learning approach (CALLA). First, the paper considers reading as a skill, like dancing or driving, citing three developmental stages in the acquisition of language reading skills, and states that improved reading in a foreign language cannot be taught simply because proficiency in reading only increases through more reading (Xianlong, 1991). Reading instructions need to relate to the ESL students' background knowledge and culturally defined literacy practices determining factors in the ESL reading performance. The CALLA approach, which combines English comprehension development, content-based ESL, and learning strategies to assist ESL students into mainstream instruction is beneficial for ESL students (with the addition of English literature) in preparing for the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE). The paper notes that the number of ESL students attending colleges and universities in English-speaking countries is increasing and recommends encouraging ESL students to read for pleasure since most school libraries have plentiful supplies of interesting books. The paper also includes sections which touch upon learning English in Japan and the English Language Institute at the University of Guam. Contains 22 references. Tips for teaching reading to ESL students and the CALLA model are appended. (NKA)

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Reading and the ESL Student

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Reading and the ESL Student

> A child learns his mother tongue--first hearing, then speaking; and only after he has acquired considerable facility in understanding and speaking, does he learn to read and write. However, most traditional methods of teaching languages to adults have almost completely reversed this process--first comes reading, closely linked with writing. (Eugene A. Nida, Reading in English, 1961, p. 3)

What is reading comprehension? First it must be recognized that reading is a complex skill. Reading is thought to function in a cognitive system constrained by a limited capacity of working memory (Sinatra & Royer, 1993). Expert chess players see configurations and familiar patterns of pieces on the board, whereas poor players see individual pieces (Bruer, 1993). In skilled reading, like expert chess players, much information is processed automatically that is very important because of the limitation of working memory. Reading comprehension thus means extracting the required information from a written text as efficiently as possible. As regards the four language skills, as emphasized by D. L. Robertson (personal communication, December 1, 1997), Director of the English Language Institute at the University of Guam, for teachers productive skills such as speaking and writing are important, but for students receptive skills such as listening and reading are important.

English as a second language (ESL) and bilingual education are relatively young fields (Benesch, 1991), yet English is by far the most widely used language in the world. This paper thus describes how ESL students can become efficient readers of English, focusing on language proficiency, ESL instructions in a foreign language, and the cognitive academic language learning approach (CALLA). The paper was followed by the sections which touch upon learning English in Japan and the English Language Institute at the University of Guam. And conclusions are drawn.

Language Proficiency and Foreign Language Reading

As noted by Nurss and Hough (1992), communicative competence as the functional language proficiency does require four aspects of language skills: (1) grammatical competence (the ability to recognize the phonological, syntactic, and semantic features of the language to understand words and sentences); (2) sociolinguistic competence (the ability to use language appropriate to particular social contexts); (3) discourse competence (the ability to understand longer pieces of a written text, including the meanings expressed between individual sentences); and (4) strategic competence (the survival strategy that fluent language users rely on to compensate for limiting factors that otherwise might lead to communication failure). Although ESL students need to develop each of the four competence, native speakers of English have developed skills in these areas of oral English.

Motivation is of great importance when reading. Reading is an active skill, involving guessing, predicting, checking, and asking oneself questions. Specifically, in Grellet 's (1981) words, reading involves a whole series of lesser skills such as:

(1) Recognizing the script of a language.

(2) Understanding explicitly stated information.

(3) Understanding conceptual meaning.

(4) Understanding the communicative function of sentences.

(5) Understanding relations between the parts of a text through lexical cohesion devices.

(6) Recognizing indicators in discourse.

(7) Distinguishing the main idea from supporting details.

(8) Selective extractions of relevant points from a text.

(9) Extracting salient points to summarize.

(10) Basic reference skills. (pp. 4-5)

ESL students tend to avoid reading long or complicated reading materials; instead, they have to be taught to bring appropriate "tools" to difficult reading tasks. According to Robertshaw, Hamblen, and Alt (1984), such tools include: Predicting what one is going to read from titles, illustrations, and abstracts is important; scanning (or locating the specific information quickly) is essential for reading; and skimming (or rapid reading for the general idea) is linked to finding the main idea. Since skimming is more than an idea identification, it is assumed that students will enlarge upon skimming as they continue their studies (Barnett, 1989).

Reading is a skill, like dancing, driving, or swimming. As theorized by Perfetti (cited in Sinatra & Royer, 1993), students may pass through the following three developmental stages in the acquisition of language reading skills:

> Stage 1: Word-processing ability plays relatively minor roles in reading ability because of slow and error-prone processing activities.
>
> Stage 2: Overall reading competence is determined largely by competence in word identification skills.
>
> Stage 3: Word identification skills are largely equalized and overall reading performance is determined by processes associated with determining the meaning of segments of the text. (p. 510)

ESL Instructions in the Second Language Reading

Improved reading in a foreign language cannot be taught simply because proficiency in reading only increases through more reading (Xianlong, 1991). As noted by Palinscar and Brown (cited in Walworth, 1985), reading comprehension is the product of decoding fluency, considerate texts, the compatibility of knowledge of the text contents, and the active strategies to enhance understanding retention. Reading comprehension tests have been concerned with the measurement of the levels of reading ability in terms of the ability to grasp and retain the facts of

paragraphs. Perkins's (1988) study of the test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL) reading subtest found that the items based on the classification paragraphs were more difficult than the items based on the serial paragraphs. The TOEFL tests are written by experts in English as a second language (D. L. Robertson, personal communication, December 1, 1997). Yet, as concluded by Perkins's study, the TOEFL reading subtests did not measure the ability of test takers to apply reasoning in reading. Validity as a measure of reading is therefore in doubt.

Reading is perhaps considered the most important skill in language learning. Many ESL students cannot read efficiently mainly because, in Cho and Krashen's (1994) words, (1) ESL students do not engage in free reading, (2) ESL students assume that reading must be always hard work, and (3) the texts used in the ESL classes are comprehensible but are not interesting. In order to promote the acquisition of a language, the text should be interesting as well as comprehensible.

Reading is primarily a mental, psychological, and individual activity. It is a complex process by which the reader reconstructs a message encoded by the writer. According to Xianlong (1991), in China ESL college students' reading abilities are extremely low, with average reading speeds of 35 to 50 words per minute; and it was neither the students' knowledge of the language nor their limited vocabularies but their flawed method of reading that hinders them from reading efficiently. Spencer and Sadoski's (1988) study found that both Oriental and Arabic college students' reading abilities were significantly lower than those of Hispanics.

ESL students come to American classrooms with a different set of language and literacy experiences than do monolingual English speaking students (Hoffman & Kossack, 1987). Reading instructions need to relate to the ESL students' background knowledge and culturally defined literacy practices determining factors in the ESL reading performance (Davis & Bistodeau, 1993). Literacy in English as a

second language, however, is acquired in much the same way it is acquired as a first language through meaningful encounters with functional materials. An integrated reading-writing-oral language teaching is therefore helpful to ESL students (see Appendix A). More important, an academic program described in the next section is vital to ESL students being prepared to participate in mainstream classes.

The Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach

English language requirements of the ESL classes may be contextualized and not cognitively demanding, albeit the language requirements of mainstream classes can be both decontextualized and demanding. As reported by Chamot and O'Malley (1986), the cognitive academic language learning approach (CALLA) combines the English comprehension development, the content-based ESL, and the learning strategies to assist the transition of ESL students into the mainstream insturcition through the three components: (1) curricula correlated to mainstream subjects, (2) academic language development activities, and (3) learning strategy instructions (for the visualized structure, see Appendix B). That is, the CALLA does focus on the English language development through cognitively based content area instructions in Science, Mathematics, and Social Studies. If English Literature is added to these three subjects, it must be beneficial for ESL students especially to prepare for the standardized tests such as Graduate Record Examinations (GRE).

The number of ESL students attending colleges and universities in English-speaking countries is increasing. American education is characteristic of speed and competition. ESL students need to be provided techniques and exercises that improve reading comprehension and at the same time increase reading speed (Lono, 1987). Thus ESL students need instructional techniques that facilitate their performance in mainstream classes. Yet the emphasis of teaching students learning English should be the same as when student learn to read their native languages.

Learning English in Japan

As noted by Nida (1961), the scientifically valid procedure in language learning may involve listening first, to be followed by speaking, and then comes reading. English is neither Greek nor Latin, yet Japanese students first involve silent reading, or grammar-translation (translate a text passage into Japanese very carefully) in learning English at school. With an incredible amount of time, energy, and effort, Japanese students cannot acquire communicative competence of English probably because such a way of learning is a great disadvantage in learning English. Flaherty's (1993) research regarding Japanese *Kanji* (ideograms which were brought in from China) found that when Japanese children between the ages of eight and twelve learned *Kanji* they accessed the phonetic code prior to the semantic code; similarly, in learning of the alphabet-habituated second language Japanese adult learners processed the phonetic code prior to the semantic. In learning English, therefore, it is better to use phonetic alphabet first, until students have mastered several hundred words and phrases. It is also better to delay reading until such time when they have a rather good conversational ability for simple situations.

The English Language Institute in Guam

The island of Guam is the largest of the island of Micronesia and the University of Guam is a fully accredited U.S. university. The goal of the English Language Institute (ELI) of t the University, which have been offering classes in ESL since 1979, is to prepare students to compete successfully with American university students, focusing on conversation and reading. According to A. M. Camacho (personal communication, November 30, 1997) Program Specialist of the ELI, the majority of the ELI students are from Korea, Japan, Taiwan, China, and Philippine.

Students come to the ELI not only to improve the English language but also to experience different cultures because Guam is Micronesia's most cosmopolitan

destination. Texts and drills used at the ELI programs, in particular, are chosen for helping students develop their basic communication skills as a foundation for reading. The ELI recognizes that ESL students should read "at a speed as close to that of the native speaker as possible, especially if the student is university bound" (Lono, 1987, p. 69). And, as emphasized by Widdowson (1984), " It is common these days to refer to reading as a communicative activity " (p. 213).

Summary and Conclusion

Reading is a "dialogue" between the reader and the text. Without the reader, any text would be meaningless. The dialogue depends on the reader's linguistic and reading proficiency as well as familiarity with the text's content. The dialogue also depends on whether the reader has appropriate schemata to interpret a piece of the written text. The CALLA is intended as a bridge between ESL and mainstream classes to supply the academic language skills that ESL students need to success in content areas. Thus curricula correlated to mainstream subjects providing ESL students with meaningful reading materials are extremely beneficial to them.

Oral language is acquired within the environment in which the student lives and functions. Reading instructions need to relate the student's cognitive and cultural schemata to the text. "A child learns his mother tongue--first hearing, then speaking . . . does he learn to read and write" (Nida, 1961, P. 3). Literacy in English as a second language is acquired in much the same way it is acquired as a first language. ESL classes should provide the students with a variety of light reading options. As suggested by Pilgreen and Krashen (1993), (1) encouraging ESL students to read for pleasure is very important and (2) school libraries with plentiful supplies of interesting books can make major contributions to the second-langauge literacy development. After all, proficiency in reading only increases through more reading.

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Appendix A

Teaching Reading to ESL Students

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1. Provide a classroom environment that allows meaningful oral language interactions with the teacher and English-speaking peers. Use concrete materials and experiences to make the oral input comprehensible.

2. Provide a meaningful written language environment that demonstrates the functional users of print and links the students' home and community print environments to the school's print environment.

3. Provide a model of reading for meaning rather than for decoding. Use culturally familiar materials and integrate new vocabularies and concepts into students existing knowledge by using rereading and concepts into students' existing knowledge by using prereading and postreading discussions and open-ended questions.

4. Provide a literacy program that incorporates interactive story reading, shared reading and taped books, the language experience approach, the use of writing through dialogue journals, and thematic units for integrated literacy instructions.

5. Provide instruction in how to comprehend content materials and to acquire study and test taking skills.

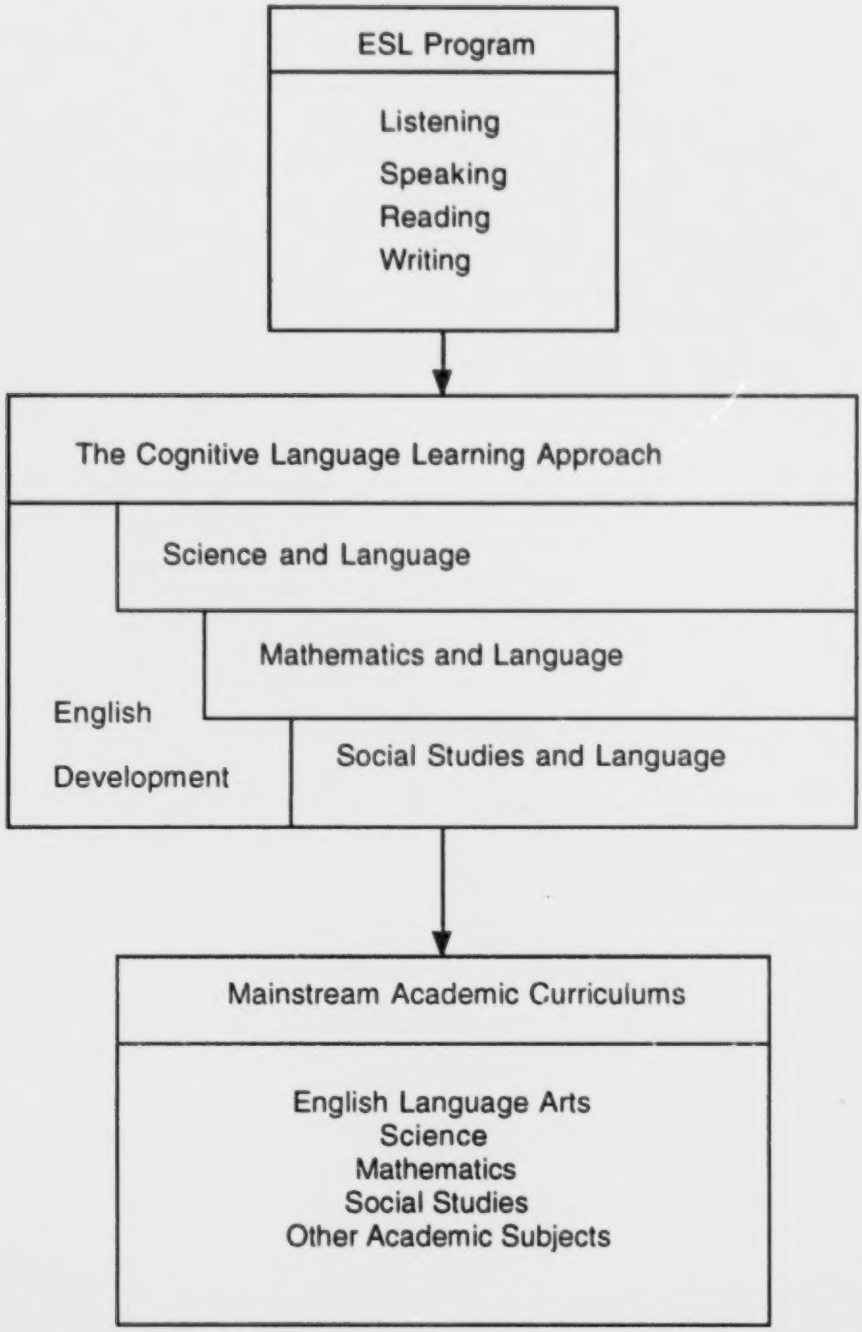
6. Provide native literacy instructions where feasible, recognizing the common language proficiency underlying reading and writing in both native and second languages.

7. Provide students who do not read in their native language with additional opportunities to understand the links between oral and written language, the functions of literacy, and the concept of print.

Source: Nurss, J. R., & Hough, R. A. (1992). Reading and the ESL Student, P. 277.

Appendix B

The CALLA Model: A bridge to the Mainstream



Source: Chamot, S. U., & O'Malley, J. M. (1986). A Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach: A ESL Content-based Curriculum. National Clearinghouse on Bilingual Education, p. 10.